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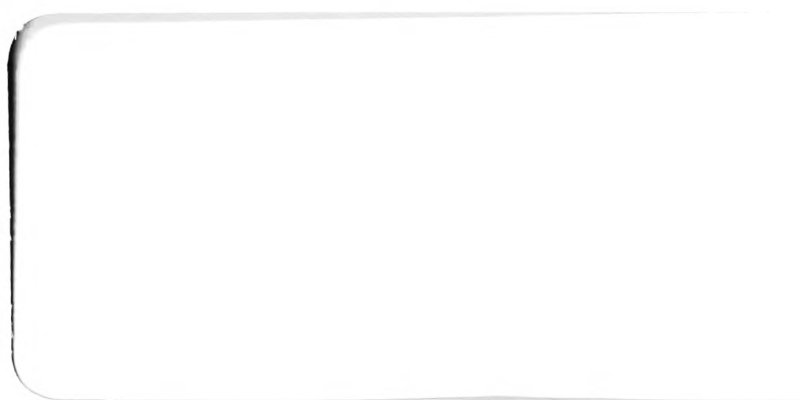
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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION BEHAVIOR

Manuel London and Gary Howat

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**College of Commerce and Business Administration
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Running Head: Commitment and Conflict Resolution Behavior

COMMITMENT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION BEHAVIOR

ABSTRACT

Different conflict resolution strategies require varying degrees of employee commitment. This study examined the relationships between five conflict resolution strategies (withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, forcing, and confronting) and three commitment measures (commitment to the organization, profession, and community). Data were collected from supervisor-subordinate dyads in public agencies. The relationships depended upon type of commitment and organizational level. For example, commitment to the community was negatively related to withdrawing. Confronting was positively related to subordinates' organizational commitment. Supervisors' professional and organizational commitment was negatively related to their use of forcing. Implications of the results for the effects of increasing employee commitment and assigning employees to work groups are discussed.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION BEHAVIOR

The occurrence of some amount of conflict between supervisors and subordinates is almost inevitable (Blake and Mouton, 1964, p. 162). At one extreme, the result of conflict may be disruptive, if not destructive, generating lasting hostility. At the other extreme, the result may be beneficial, stimulating innovative ideas that make organizational growth possible (Robbins, 1974). The effects of conflict may depend more on how it is resolved than on the reasons for its emergence (Thomas, 1976). Therefore, determining what factors are related to the use of different conflict resolution strategies will be important for effective conflict management. Methods of conflict resolution differ in the extent of employee commitment required. Moreover, job commitment is likely to influence an employee's willingness to spend time and energy resolving conflict. This study examines the relationship between the use of alternative conflict resolution strategies and dimensions of supervisor and subordinate job commitment.

Numerous methods of conflict resolution have been identified by a number of authors (see MacCrimmon and Taylor, 1976, for a review). One parsimonious and general set of conflict resolution strategies that has received considerable attention by organization researchers was formulated by Blake and Mouton (1964). Their strategies are labeled withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, forcing, and confronting. Burke (1970) found that managers perceived confrontation to be the most frequently used and most effective strategy. Renwick (1975a, 1975b) and Bernadin and Alvares (1975) showed that perceptions of conflict resolution are a function of organizational level and the source and topic of disagreement. Nevertheless, these studies revealed strong behavioral tendencies to engage in different resolution strategies

regardless of the situation. This raises the possibility that these behavioral tendencies may be determined by individual differences in such a such a variable as employee commitment.

Understanding the nature of the different conflict resolution strategies leads to predictions of the relationships between the use of each strategy and commitment. Black and Mouton's theory relates managerial styles (concern for people and concern for production) to conflict resolution (see Bernadin and Alvares, 1976, for a test of the theory). The current study deals with the association between conflict resolution and the more general construct of commitment. Therefore, the following predictions, based on Blake and Mouton's (1974) definitions, apply to both supervisors and subordinates.

1. Withdrawing refers to leaving the situation either directly, by physical flight, or indirectly, by ignoring a communication, refusing to respond, or responding with "double talk." This "ostrich dynamic" is typical of the individual who lacks commitment and does not wish to get involved. Therefore, a negative relationship can be expected between commitment and withdrawal.

2. Smoothing is accomplished by playing down differences and emphasizing common interests. The employee who expresses some commitment but does not wish to be highly involved is a person who seeks to achieve harmonious and accepting relationships while avoiding disagreements. As a result, the relationship between commitment and smoothing should be positive but not of strong magnitude.

3. Compromise is the strategy of finding a middle ground between divergent interests. The resolution will not meet the full requirements of both parties but it will be preferable to continuing the argument. Although compromise does not necessitate risking criticism, it does require commitment to take action. Consequently, commitment should be positively related to compromising.

4. Forcing results in eliminating conflict by authority. Supervisors usually have control vested in their positions which allows them to carry out or threaten punishment (e.g., firing) to obtain subordinate compliance. Subordinates also can exert force by arguing that they have certain responsibilities defined by their job descriptions which allow them to structure the situation as they wish. The individual who is likely to force an issue has low commitment, desiring to reach a quick resolution regardless of the consequences to group cohesiveness or the work climate. Therefore, commitment should be negatively related to forcing.

5. Confrontation refers to bringing the problem into the open and carrying it out to resolution. This necessitates a willingness to devote time and energy to discussing the reasons for disagreement and risking the possibility of emotionally hurting oneself and others. Commitment should be highly and positively related to confronting.

Each of the above hypotheses may be tested separately for different types of commitment. Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian (1974) viewed commitment as a willingness to exert high levels of effort on behalf of the organization, an acceptance of the organization's major goals and values, and a strong desire to remain a member of the organization. Other authors have also defined commitment in terms of the organization (e.g., Gouldner, 1957, 1958; Lee, 1971; Hrebiniak and Alluto, 1972; Buchanon, 1974; and Steers, 1977). Gouldner (1957, 1958) expanded the notion of commitment to include a professional or "cosmopolitan" orientation compared to an organizational or "local" orientation. Professional commitment was defined as loyalty to specialized role skills and identification with a reference group outside the organization. Another type of commitment is the loyalty of the employee to those served by the organization. Examples of this type of commitment include a salesman's loyalty to

his customers, a politician's concern for his constituency, and, in the case of the present study, a public service worker's attachment to the community. While there are no a priori reasons to hypothesize that the three types of commitment described above are differentially related to the use of the various conflict resolution strategies, possible differences between the commitment dimensions will be examined.

METHOD

Sample

Questionnaires were sent to 76 parks and recreation districts throughout the State of Illinois. Complete data were obtained from one supervisor and one subordinate in 49 districts. The final sample adequately represented the range of communities with populations greater than 10,000. The sample included five female supervisors and ten female subordinates. No significant differences were found between males and females, so the data reported here are based on the combined sample. The mean age of all respondents was 32 years. Eighty-five percent had a college degree or higher. Mean tenure in the position was 3.8 years, and mean tenure in the organization was 6.7 years. Supervisors generally had been with the organization longer and earned a higher salary than subordinates.

Procedure

A questionnaire packet was mailed to each park and recreation district sampled. The accompanying letter asked the director to complete the questionnaire labeled "supervisor" and to give the other questionnaire to a subordinate directly under his/her supervision. Stamped, addressed envelopes were provided

for supervisors and subordinates to mail their questionnaires separately to the researcher.

Questionnaire

Commitment. Each individual completed measures of his/her own commitment to the organization (5 items, e.g., "I would leave this agency if offered the same job with another agency."), profession (5 items, e.g., "Improving my skills as a professional is more important to me than any individual project."), and community (6 items, e.g., "I try to help people in the community use our services.").¹ Responses to each item ranged from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). The items within each scale were averaged resulting in three commitment measures. The median inter-item correlation corrected using the Spearman-Brown formula was .52 for commitment to the organization, .59 for commitment to the profession, and .70 for commitment to the community. These reliability coefficients are all significant at the .01 level. The organizational commitment index was independent of commitment to the community ($r=.10$, n.s.) and commitment to the profession ($r=-.15$, n.s.). Commitment to the community and profession were positively related ($r=.37$, $p<.01$) demonstrating some overlap in these constructs. The three commitment measures were not significantly related to tenure in the organization or tenure in the position. Age was significantly related to supervisors' organizational commitment ($r=.47$, $p<.01$), but not to any other commitment measures. These results indicate that the commitment measures were not simple reflections of personal characteristics.

Conflict resolution strategies. Subordinates responded to questions about the conflict resolution behavior of the supervisor. Supervisors responded to questions about the conflict resolution behavior of the subordinate asked to

complete the subordinate questionnaire. In addition, self-ratings of conflict resolution behavior were collected from both supervisors and subordinates. Four types of disagreements were listed: "disagreements about the use of equipment, supplies, and/or facilities," "disagreement about professional activities (for example, time off for attending a professional meeting, reading professional journals on the job, enrolling in a class to improve professional skills, etc.)," "disagreements about organizational policies or procedures (for example, sick leave, absences, leaving work early, amount of time spent on breaks, alcohol on the job, etc.)," and "disagreements about what activities or facilities are best for the community." Information from individuals in the parks and recreation field indicated that these were important types of disagreements. For each disagreement, the respondent was asked how likely his/her supervisor (subordinate) was to (a) refrain from arguments, try not to get involved? (withdrawing), (b) play down the differences and emphasize common interests? (smoothing), (c) search for an intermediate position, try to find a compromise? (compromising), d) use the power of his/her position to win acceptance of his/her own point of view? (forcing), and (e) bring the problem clearly into the open and carry it out to resolution? (confronting). A 7-point scale ranging from "very unlikely" to "very likely" followed each conflict resolution strategy. A similar section of the questionnaire asked for ratings about the respondent's own behavior.

RESULTS

Before examining the relationships between commitment and conflict resolution behavior, an examination of the conflict ratings is necessary. Self-ratings of conflict resolution behavior were obtained for comparison with ratings made by the other individual in the supervisor-subordinate dyad.

Renwick (1975a) found the employees' perceptions of the resolution strategies used by a coworker were more similar to their own self-ratings than to the coworkers' self-ratings. This bias was not evident in the present study. The median correlation between supervisors' ratings of themselves and their perceptions of their subordinates was .07 (n.s.). The median correlation between subordinates' ratings of themselves and their perceptions of their supervisors' was .11 (n.s.). On the other hand, high agreement was found between supervisors' self-ratings and subordinates' perceptions of their supervisors (median $r=.47$, $p<.01$). Also, agreement was evident between subordinates' self-ratings and supervisors' perceptions of their subordinates (median $r=.33$, $p<.01$). This information supports the reliability of the ratings. Self-ratings of the conflict resolution strategies were not correlated with commitment, which was totally self-report, to avoid possible response-response error. Commitment was correlated only with the conflict resolution behavior perceived by the other member of the dyad. Therefore, only each respondent's conflict ratings of the other member were analyzed further.

The intercorrelations among the five conflict resolution strategies for the four types of disagreements are presented in Table 1. These data are based upon the combined sample of supervisors and subordinates. The median correlations for items measuring the same conflict resolution strategy for different disagreements were .64 for withdrawing, .59 for smoothing, .59 for compromising, .79 for forcing, and .75 for confronting, all significant at the .01 level. The median correlation for items measuring different strategies for the same type of disagreement was .03 and the median correlation between different conflict resolution strategies and different disagreements was .07. Therefore, the perceived likelihood of an individual engaging in a particular conflict resolution strategy did not depend on the nature of the disagreement.

This justifies averaging responses across disagreements to obtain an index for each conflict resolution strategy. These measures were calculated and used in further analyses. The intercorrelations among the five average scores demonstrated that they were not independent. Withdrawing was positively related to smoothing ($r=.20$, $p<.05$) and negatively related to confronting ($r=-.32$, $p<.01$). Compromising was positively related to smoothing ($r=.52$, $p<.01$) and confronting ($r=.38$, $p<.01$) and negatively related to forcing ($r=-.25$, $p<.05$).

Insert Table 1 About Here

Means and standard deviations for the conflict resolution strategies and commitment measures are presented in Table 2. Withdrawing was the conflict resolution strategy least likely to occur while confronting was the strategy most likely to occur. Subordinates were viewed as more likely to withdraw from a conflict than supervisors. On the other hand, supervisors were more likely to force a resolution than subordinates. No other mean differences were found between supervisors and subordinates for the remaining strategies. Commitment to the community was significantly higher than both commitment to the organization and commitment to the profession. No significant differences were found between supervisor and subordinate commitment scores.

Insert Table 2 About Here

The relationships between the commitment measures and the likelihood of engaging in each conflict resolution strategy were analyzed using partial correlations, holding variance due to the other conflict resolution strategies constant. This was done because the strategies were inter-related. The partial correlations resulted in relationships involving each strategy independently of the others. No attempt was made to control for the relatively minor covariation in the three commitment measures. The results are provided in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 About Here

Examining the significant results for subordinates first, the hypothesized negative relationship between commitment and withdrawing occurred only for commitment to the profession and the community. No commitment measures were significantly related to smoothing or forcing, and only commitment to the community was positively related to compromising. Organizational commitment was positively related to confronting, but professional commitment was negatively related to confronting.

Turning to the significant results for supervisors, only commitment to the community was negatively related to withdrawing. No commitment measures were significantly related to smoothing or compromising. The anticipated negative relationship between commitment and forcing was significant for professional and organizational commitment. Commitment to the community and the profession were negatively correlated to confronting.

The average commitment of both the supervisor and subordinate should be related to the tendency for each conflict resolution strategy to be used by both members of the dyad. To test this general hypothesis, the supervisor and subordinate scores were averaged for each variable. The commitment-conflict resolution strategy relationships based upon the dyad as the unit of analysis are included in Table 3. Commitment to the community was negatively related to withdrawing and commitment to the profession was negatively related to confronting, similar to the results found for supervisors and subordinates separately. Organizational commitment was positively related to confronting, as occurred for subordinates alone. A significant result that did not emerge from the prior analyses was a negative relationship between organizational commitment and compromising.

DISCUSSION

A basic finding which paved the way for subsequent analyses was that the perceived use of a conflict resolution strategy was not dependent on the nature of the disagreement involved. Apparently, employees form overall perceptions about the conflict resolution strategies likely to be used by a supervisor or subordinate, and these perceptions do not substantially vary for different disagreements.

The expression of commitment was related to conflict resolution behavior. However, each commitment measure was differentially related to the five conflict resolution strategies. Furthermore, the correlations differed for supervisors and subordinates. The results may be summarized separately for each strategy.

1. A negative relationship was hypothesized between commitment and withdrawing from conflict. Supervisors and subordinates who were committed to the community and subordinates who were committed to the organization were not likely to withdraw.

2. A low positive relationship was hypothesized between commitment and smoothing. However, no significant relationships were found between the commitment measures and smoothing.

3. Positive correlations were predicted between commitment and compromising. Consistent with this hypothesis, subordinates who expressed high commitment to the community were likely to use compromise to resolve conflict. However, the more both the supervisor and subordinate in a dyad were committed to the organization, the less likely they were to compromise. Apparently, confronting, rather than compromising, was more likely for those committed to the organization.

4. Negative correlations were expected between commitment and forcing. This hypothesis was supported in that supervisors' organizational and professional commitment were inversely related to forcing. No significant correlations were found between forcing and commitment for subordinates. Thus, forcing is more sensitive to the commitment of supervisors than subordinates, perhaps since supervisors are more likely to use forcing than subordinates.

5. Lastly, strong positive correlations were predicted between commitment and confronting. The significant correlations that emerged were not very strong, nor were they always positive. Subordinates high in organizational commitment were likely to confront, but subordinates high in professional commitment were not. Also, supervisors who were committed to the community or profession were not likely to confront. Thus, confrontation may be more frequent when organizational commitment is high, but the risks of confrontation may be avoided by those who are committed to the profession or community. Confrontation demands time and energy and a direct expression of one's opinions. While this may be in the best interests of the organization, at least in the long run, employees who aspire toward recognition from the profession or the community or who are highly concerned with reaching solutions that are in the best interests of individuals outside the organization are unlikely to chance internal confrontation. This may create a bind for the supervisor who is highly committed to both the profession and the organization--a bind that may result in role conflict, dissatisfaction, and/or low performance. The effects of such a dilemma should be examined in future research.

Additional information collected from the respondents but not reported earlier dealt with ratings of the frequency of disagreements. Interestingly,

none of the commitment measures were related to the occurrence of disagreements, even though commitment was related to how the disagreements were resolved.

Whether commitment causes the use of different conflict resolution strategies or vice versa cannot be determined from this study. If commitment influences conflict resolution behavior, then changing commitment should have an effect on which strategies are adopted. For example, enhancing organizational commitment may lead to an increased use of confrontation and a decreased use of supervisors exerting force. Promoting commitment to the community and profession is likely to lessen the frequency of withdrawing and forcing although it may also lower the probability of confrontation. The differential effects of increased commitment on the behavior of supervisors and subordinates should be taken into account when designing strategies to increase employee commitment. In general, organizational commitment may be improved by providing attractive fringe benefits, pleasant physical surroundings, and other job outcomes that tie the individual to the organization. Professional commitment may be fostered by encouraging communication with colleagues in other organizations, supplying funds and the time off to attend professional meetings, supporting educational advancement, etc. In public service organizations, commitment to the community can be strengthened by facilitating community meetings with staff members and by requiring that information be conveyed to, and obtained from, local residents before programs are implemented. Commitment to the community may be assured when survival of the agency or particular programs depends on public vote.

Another causal inference is that different conflict resolution strategies influence commitment. For example, the use of confrontation may cause employees to attribute their investment of time and energy and risk of self-

esteem to organizational commitment. Alternately, confrontation may result in beneficial outcomes that enhance organizational commitment. The direction of causality between commitment and conflict management should be investigated in a longitudinal study or experimental design to understand these phenomena more completely.

The finding that commitment to the community was generally higher than organizational or professional commitment and the fact that there were differences between employees on all measures of commitment indicate that commitment is generated naturally to some extent. Knowing the commitment of employees may help structure work groups so that members are likely to respond in similar or compatible ways when conflict arises.

Of course, other variables than employee commitment may influence the use of conflict resolution strategies either directly or indirectly. For example, individuals with high self-esteem may be prone to adopt a confrontation strategy but will be most likely to do so when they are committed to the organization. Future studies should examine such variables as additional moderators of conflict resolution behavior.

FOOTNOTES

Requests for reprints should be sent to Manuel London, AT&T, Basic Human Resources Unit, 285 North Maple Avenue, Basking Ridge, New Jersey 07920.

¹The commitment questionnaire may be obtained by writing to the first author.

TABLE 1

Intercorrelations among the Conflict Resolution Strategies

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Disagreements about the use of equipment, supplies, and/or facilities																				
1. withdrawing	--																			
2. smoothing	.19*	--																		
3. compromising	.11	.40**	--																	
4. forcing	-.06	-.12	-.21*	--																
5. confronting	-.25**	.12	.29**	-.09	--															
Disagreements about professional activities																				
6. withdrawing	.65**	.07	.02	-.02	-.21*	--														
7. smoothing	.11	.76**	.37**	-.20*	.18*	.21*	--													
8. compromising	.10	.30**	.69**	.19*	.23*	.09	.37**	--												
9. forcing	.01	-.04	-.26**	.77**	.12	.05	-.03	-.17**	--											
10. confronting	-.29**	.08	.30**	-.13	.00*	.29**	.11	.25**	-.20*	--										
Disagreements about organizational policies and procedures																				
11. withdrawing	.63**	.06	-.04	.06	-.21*	.69**	.14	.10	.15	-.29**	--									
12. smoothing	.15	.54**	.37**	-.17*	.04	.23*	.54**	.40**	-.09	.02	.26**	--								
13. compromising	.20*	.34**	.84**	.07	.26**	.21**	.11	.22**	.10*	.12*	.13*	.12*	--							
14. forcing	.01	-.02	-.27**	.77**	.07	.07	.04	.22*	.80**	.11	.07	-.35	-.19*	--						
15. confronting	-.27**	.08	.33**	-.14	.69**	.32**	.08	.15	-.17*	.84**	.33**	-.05	.26**	-.21	--					
Disagreements about what activities or facilities are best for the community																				
16. withdrawing	.61**	.09	-.09	.12	.22**	.65**	.13	.06	.15	-.29**	.76**	.16	.11	.10	-.26**	--				
17. smoothing	.08	.52**	.39**	-.11	-.03	.10	.35**	.46**	-.05	.06	.13	.67**	.11	.10	.04	.24*	--			
18. compromising	.15	.39**	.59**	.15	.20**	.15	.36**	.54**	.15	.37**	.11	.30**	.59**	.10*	.33**	.09	.36**	--		
19. forcing	.02	.01	-.18*	.70**	.10	.08	.05	.24*	.80**	.17	.11*	.14	-.08	.78**	.17*	.11	-.08	-.18*	--	
20. confronting	-.21*	.06	.41**	-.04	.70**	.22**	.01	.20*	-.16	.11*	.10*	.10*	.12*	.27**	.10*	.21*	.03	.34**	-.15	--

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

TABLE 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and t Values for the
Conflict Resolution Strategy and Commitment Measures

	<u>Total Sample</u>	<u>Supervisors</u>	<u>Subordinates</u>	<u>Significant t's</u>
Conflict Resolution Strategies				
Withdrawing	2.57 (1.69)	2.30 (1.39)	2.84 (1.93)	1.59*
Smoothing	4.47 (1.53)	4.43 (1.50)	4.52 (1.57)	
Compromising	4.94 (1.35)	4.87 (1.51)	5.02 (1.17)	
Forcing	3.28 (1.91)	3.82 (1.98)	2.73 (1.68)	2.95**
Confronting	5.44 (1.69)	5.46 (1.69)	5.42 (1.72)	
Commitment to the				
Organization	4.71 (1.03)	4.73 (.97)	4.64 (1.10)	
Profession	4.72 (.79)	4.67 (.74)	4.76 (.84)	
Community	6.23 (.65)	6.28 (.72)	6.18 (.58)	
n	98	49	49	

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

*p<.05

**p<.01

TABLE 3
Partial Correlations Between the
Conflict Resolution Strategies
and Commitment Measures

	Conflict Resolution Strategies				
	With- drawing	Smoothing	Compro- mising	Forcing	Con- fronting
Subordinates'					
Commitment to the					
Organization	.06	-.12	-.23	-.03	.25*
Profession	-.25*	-.06	.16	-.09	-.42**
Community	-.32*	-.09	.25*	.07	-.04
Supervisors'					
Commitment to the					
Organization	-.04	-.19	-.08	-.31*	.04
Profession	-.08	-.18	.10	-.26*	-.25*
Community	-.39**	-.13	.04	-.15	-.32*
Average in Supervisor- Subordinate Dyads					
Commitment to the					
Organization	-.04	.12	-.27*	-.23	.25*
Profession	-.22	.12	.07	-.09	-.38*
Community	-.40**	-.04	.16	-.09	-.22

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

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